

# Expectations and Misgivings at Decolonization in Ngugi wa Thiongo's novel *A Grain of Wheat*

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## Abstract

*An African decolonization was accompanied by unreasonable euphoria and idealistic triumphalism, since people, then, were aspirant for a rapid improvement in their life. The unfolding of events had, nonetheless, contradicted the hopes of the people. The African rulers who were installed in power at the departure of colonial ruler not only perpetuated people suffering under colonization, but also aggravated it. African writers, who though shared the happiness of the people, had their misgivings on the future of the local rule. One of such writers was the Kenyan ,Ngugi wa Thiongo whose novel *A Grain of Wheat* testifies to such prescience. Though celebratory in mood, the novel contains enough details that would undermine that avowed celebration. Concentrating on this novel the present paper aspires to zoom in the author's apprehensions about the prospective economic and social change at the very Day of Independence.*

**Key words:** African, decolonization, symbolism, irony, Ngugi.

## Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an eminent Kenyan novelist, playwright, essayist and political activist who lives in exile because of his dissident idea. The central concern of his writing is the suffering of his people at the hand of colonial ruler and their local heirs. Thus, the novel under investigation herein, is real testimony on such a claim. *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi's third novel, is essentially about the story of Thabai, a Gikuyu village, at the moment of Kenyan decolonization. The village is depicted as it hectically prepares for the celebration of independence. The time setting of the novel is, precisely the four days leading Kenya's Independence Day- December,12,1963. However through the narrative technique of flashback the novel encompasses the whole colonial period of the country.

## Congruency between form and Content

In terms of content, the controversies concerning the roles of colonial education and Christianity raised in *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* are less emphasized in this novel as it focuses more on the socio-political domain, depicting the long-standing struggle of the peasants against British rule. What makes *A Grain of Wheat* especially different from *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* is its formal structure which perfectly corresponds to its thematic concern. Even though the three novels are narrated by a narrator with an omniscient point of view, *A Grain of Wheat* involves a more complicated narrative technique and deployment of time. It displays multiple narratives of different characters in a non-chronological manner.

Even though the actual time in the novel lasts for only four days, with the techniques of flashback and retrospection, the novel covers the period of Kenyan decolonization between the 1950s and 1963, the year which saw official Kenyan independence. With such a sophisticated handling of narrative structure, Ngugi allows the reader to delve more deeply into the complicated psychology of the main characters both as individual subjects and community members who are profoundly affected by colonialism in different ways.

Another point of contrast between *A Grain of Wheat* and Ngugi's two earlier novels is the delineation of characters. Whereas, in both *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* there is one central character, *A Grain of Wheat* has four central characters. Through relating the life stories of these four characters and their immediate associates and adversaries Ngugi captures vividly the social and political realities of Kenya during the years that lead to the end of colonial rule. Each of the four characters has a harrowing tale of suffering during the emergency. The main characters all have their own wounds caused by decolonization. Gikonyo is the first one to confess the oath in the detention camp, Mumbi is unfaithful to Gikonyo by having a child with Karanja, Karanja is considered as a traitor as he becomes a Chief serving the colonizers, and Mugo feels guilty after killing Kihika.

As these four characters narrate their live stories to one another, the concomitant ordeal many Kenyans had to endure during the war of independence is forcefully revealed. . By positioning historical facts within the locus of domestic experience Ngugi, has enhanced the familiarity and the intelligibility of what might otherwise seem to be distant and abstract historical events. *A Grain of Wheat* has consequently, collapsed the boundary between the personal and the public.

### Hopes and Expectations

The temporal and spatial planes, as earlier noted, are the four days before independence (Uhuru) and the village of Thabai, when and where people are busy preparing for the Independence Day celebration. As one village elder puts it 'we of Thabai Village must also dance our part' (Thiong'o, 1967:9). Since Thabai had lost its brave son Kihika during the struggle for independence, the local branch of the Movement is planning to commemorate that fighter on Independence Day. Through the narrative technique of flashback, the life story of that freedom fighter is fully recounted. Employing the grand stories of the national heroes elders inculcate the spirit of resistance to injustice in the young generation. The following passage demonstrates how the tradition of nationalist resistance is disseminated and shapes the colonial subjects like Kihika:

*Kihika's interest in politics began when he was a small boy and sat under the feet of Warui listening to stories of how the land was taken from people. . . . Warui needed only a listener: he recounted the deeds of Waiyaki and other warriors, who, by 1900 had been killed in the struggle to drive out the Whiteman from the land; of Young Harry and the fate that befell the 1923 Procession; of Muthirigu and the mission schools that forbade circumcision in order to eat, like insects, both the roots and the stem of the Gikuyu society. . . . Kihika's hearts hardened toward*

s 'these people', long before he had even encountered a white face. (Thiong'o,1967:83)

It is noteworthy that the Gikuyu narrative of prophecy, focused on in *The River Between* where one is born to be a prophet and has to warn his people of threats from outside, still pervades this later novel. The small Kihika, who is fed with the stories of anti-colonial resistance, imagines himself, like the character Waiyaki in *The River Between*, as a saint who is going to rescue his people. However, unlike Waiyaki, Kihika takes the narrative seriously as he has already accomplished some anti-colonial missions such as the murder of D.O. Robson and the siege of a police station. Kihika can be perceived as a practical version of Waiyaki in as much as the latter carried out what the former dreams of achieving. Waiyaki's belief that Christianity can be used to serve nationalistic and liberatory agenda is central in Kihika revolutionary struggle. His comrades recall how Kihika holds on to his bible in which he underlines verses that are pertinent to freedom. The following verse as the narrator of *A Grain of Wheat* relates is underlined in Kihika's bible:

*And the lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmaster, for I knew their sorrow*  
(Thiong'o: ,1967:132)

This is, nonetheless, by no means a surprising, since the epigraph of the novel is a quotation from the bible and the symbolic meaning likewise is predicated on the bible. Ngugi's awareness of the complicity of Christianity with colonialism in subjugating the colonized people does not prevent him from believing in the liberatory potentiality of Christianity. Almost, in all his works he paints a picture of priests who embody colonialist agenda. At the same time , many of the anti-colonial freedom fighters resort to the bible as a spiritual anchorage for their struggle.

### Valorization of History

Engaging of history in *A Grain of Wheat* in its great part consists in contesting the colonial representation of the Mau Mau, which is characterized by misrepresentation and vilification. In his study of nationalism, Lazarus (1999:69) notes that nationalist movements in the so-called Third-World countries are usually classified under "the rubrics of atavism, anarchy, irrationality, and power-mongering". Such a generalization, which no doubt aims at undermining the Third-World national solidarity against foreign oppression, can be found in the British account of the Mau Mau Movement during the 1950s and the early 1960s. Studying how this anti-colonial movement is represented by its colonizers, Lonsdale (1993:37) remarks that "It has lived in British memory as a symbol of African savagery, and modern Kenyans are divided by its images, militant nationalism or tribalist thuggery". Lonsdale's statement betrays a belief that not only is the Mau Mau movement regarded by the British as primitive, irrational and even apolitical, but also thought of as a tribal movement limited to the Gikuyu. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi seems to dispute these two claims, suggesting that the movement is a politically motivated one which transcends tribal boundaries in Kenya. Such an image is what Ngugi wants the Kenyans to remember and identify with when the name of the Mau Mau is evoked

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi shows that the Mau Mau movement is a revolution with a noble cause that needs to be carried out in a culturally specific way. To represent the Mau Mau as a just resistance movement, Ngugi has created two characters that stand in opposition to one another. While Kihika is a voice of the freedom movement, Thompson represents the British occupying power. In his diary which he intends to be a philosophical text called *Prospero in Africa*, Thompson mentions the murder of Colonel Robson by the Mau Mau:

*Colonel Robson, a Senior District Officer in Rung'ei, Kiambu, was savagely murdered. I am replacing him at Rung'ei. One must use a stick No government can tolerate anarchy, no civilization can be built on this violence and savagery. Mau Mau is evil: a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven.*  
(Thiong'o, 1967:55)

It is noteworthy that while Ngugi uses Kihika as a collective voice of the Mau Mau, he describes the violent acts of Robson in opposition to those of Kihika. Ngugi draws this comparison to render the Mau Mau a more just political movement and to question the British justification of their power in Kenya. The image of Robson as seen by the natives is that of the savage:

*Generally known as Tom, the Terror, he is the epitome of those dark days in our history that witnessed his birth as a District Officer in Rung'ei — that is, when the Emergency raged in unabated fury. People said he was mad. They spoke of him with awe, called him Tom or simply 'he' as if the mention of his full name would conjure him up in their presence. . . . Some village men saw his jeep in their dreams and screamed. He was a man-eater, walking in the night and day. He was death. He was especially brutal to squatters who were repatriated from the Rift Valley back to Gikuyu' (Thiong'o, 1967:168)*

The presentation of that colonial ruler as a capricious monster who can shoot or pardon his victims all at whim, is clearly designed to counterbalance the image of the Mau Mau painted in colonial discourse. Using the typical demonizing attributes for European colonizer Ngugi here seems to fight the enemy with his own weapon, and thereby ameliorates the violent activities of the Mau Mau. The gunning down of D.O Robson by Kihika, for example can be perceived of as a heroic disposing of a tyrant. Likewise the rampant liquidations and summary killing of many African collaborators appear as only fair punishment for traitors.

It is apparent that in the novel Ngugi uses Kihika to defend the terrorist strategy of the Mau Mau. Persuading Mugo to join the movement, Kihika reasons why they have to kill: "We are not murderers. We are not hanging men – like Robson – killing men and women without cause or purpose" (Thiong'o, 1967:190). Kihika is here implicitly drawing a distinction between murderers and political terrorists. A difference between these two groups rests on the fact that while criminals commit a crime out of personal malice, political prisoners carry out their action, no matter how violent, with a clear political end. As Kihika further explains to Mugo:

*We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek. You turn the right cheek. One, two, three – sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say: I am not turning the other cheek any more. Your back to the wall, you strike back. . . . We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man's freedom. . . . Strike tenor in the heart of the oppressor. (Thiong'o,1967:191)*

Kihika's explanation leads us to an understanding that there are at least two kinds of violence. While the first kind is carried out to control the subaltern group, the other kind is made in the name of social justice. Thiong'o (1972: 28) seems to suggest that looking at violence at only its surface is insufficient to determine what kind of violence it is since what distinguishes these two types of violence lies in the intention of the agents: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery; it purifies man. What is more important is that any judgment or justification of an act of violence will be valid only when the context in which it is made is taken into consideration. By having Kihika talk about violence, Ngugi makes it clear that it is colonial suppression that has caused political violence in Kenya in the first place. The violence of the British authority and that of the Mau Mau are not comparable because while the first is made to take an advantage of a people, the latter is made to protect their own rights and liberties. As Ngugi (1972:29) has noted, "Mau Mau violence was anti-injustice; white violence was to thwart the cause of justice. Should we equate the two forms?"

Ngugi , here, apparently draws on Fanon's justificatory discourse concerning Algerian resistance. Fanon (1963:19) argues that in the context of Algerian decolonization the use of violence is necessary in anti-colonial movements:

*"The exploited man sees that his liberation implies the use of all means, and that of force first and foremost. . . . colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat, no Algerian really found these terms too violent. The leaflet only expressed what every Algerian felt at heart: colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence"*

## Fear and Misgivings

*A Grain of Wheat* though, avowedly, is a narrative celebrating Kenyan independence, the novel portrays the moment of victory with a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty. The incongruent emotion of frustration and despair surrounding the festivities of lowering the Union Jack and hoisting, in its place the flag of Kenya, is played out macrocosmically via the mist and continuous rainfall. In the morning of the independence celebration day, it rains so hard that the crops are badly damaged and "the morning itself was so dull we feared the day would not break into life" (GOW:205). The negative image of rain foreshadows difficulties the Kenyans are to encounter in the near postcolonial future. Microcosmically, the misgivings of characters in the novel display seem to parallel those meteoric conditions. For example, Mwaura cannot help shudder at the unexpected encounter with ghosts from



his past even as he runs the race of his life to celebrate the coming Uhuru.. ‘the ghost had come to eat into his life; the cool Uhuru drink had turned insipid in his mouth’ (Thiong'o,1967:214). The narrator, similarly does not fail to notice the muddled perception of the celebrators notwithstanding the overwhelming crescendo of songs:

*Everybody waited for something to happen. This waiting and uncertainty that went with it – like a woman between fear and joy during birth motion – was a taut cord beneath the screams and the shouts and laughter. (Thiong'o:203)*

The combination of happiness and sadness encodes the birth of Kenya as a matter of life and death. There is a reason for Ngugi to fear and employ the narrative of uncertainty and doubt in this novel, for the birth of the baby does not mean the end of the mother's suffering and fear. As the narrator says, “What happened yesterday could happen today. The same thing, over and over again, through history” (Thiong'o:106). Suppression caused by colonialism, for example, the problem of land dispossession, does not end after Kenya gains her official independence, but it changes its form, done in the mask of neocolonialism.

The euphoria of independence is underplayed in the novel by the employment of two antithetic literary tropes. Both irony and allegory dominate the rendering of the details in *A Grain of Wheat* as Gikandi (1999: 74) has observed. At the level of characterization, for instance, several characters play, at once, allegorical and ironic role. Probably the best illustration of this can be found in the character of Mugo. Valorized in the collective conscious of the village at the beginning of the novel as the village hero, he turns out to be in the end an arch traitor. Not knowing that Mugo has betrayed Kihika the true heroic martyr, Thabai villagers have unanimously nominated him as the principal speaker on the occasion of commemorating Kihika. Mugo's allegorical stance is magnified further by his categorical refusal to play the role assigned to him by the people, as they interpret his refusal as modesty. Women sing his praise and a village elder deplore Mugo's his absence saying ' Independence Day without him would be stale, he is Kihika born again' (Thiong'o:181). In connection to Mugo's character Ngugi uses a peculiar type of dramatic irony. Even before treacherous act of Mugo is revealed the reader is not led to sympathize with him notwithstanding, the fact that every other character in the novel views him as epitome of heroism.

*A Grain of Wheat* seems to undermine the very scheme that it sets out to construct. The celebratory mood that strewn by apprehension exhibits the authors own skepticism as to how can independence influence the life of the ordinary Kenyans. Ngugi calls into question the meaning of independence which is manipulated by the nation-state controlled by the elite and the indigenous bourgeoisie. The fruits of Uhuru are not eaten by the working-class people and the peasants, the two classes which Ngugi thinks form the majority of the freedom fighters. Mau Mau in this case serves another function as it is used by Ngugi to delegitimize the nation-state which does not keep its promise in the postcolonial Kenya. In this respect, Fanon's polemics have clearly found their way to Ngugi's narrative . *The Wretched of the Earth* has provided Ngugi with the proper epistemological lenses to make out accurately the shortcomings of the postcolonial state. It is especially the chapter entitled “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” that shapes the theme of fear and disillusion. In his prophetic critique of the narrative of nationalism during decolonization,

Fanon(1963:148) has noted that: National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of mobilization of the people, will be in any case an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been . According to Fanon, the “travesty of what might have been” is engendered by two things: tribalism and control of the nation-state by the elite and national middle class. In *A Grain of Wheat*, this concern is perfectly articulated by Gikonyo:

*It is those who did not take part in the Movement, the same who ran to the shelter of schools and universities and administration. And even some who were outright traitors and collaborators. There are some who only the other day were singing songs composed for them by the Blundells: Uhuru bado! or Let us carve Kenya into small pieces! At political meetings you hear them shout: Uhuru, Uhuru, we fought for. Fought where? They are mere uncircumcised boys. They knew suffering as a word.*  
(Thiong'o,1967:68-69)

Gikonyo here expresses a grave doubt about the benefit of independence to those who suffer immensely at the times of decolonization struggle. The freedom, equality and rights which it guarantees for people during the nationalist period become merely empty words. After independence, administrative and political power is transferred from the colonizers to the few educated elite and the bourgeois whom in the words of Fanon (1963::151) “are completely ignorant of the economy of their own country” . All they want to do is just to reap the benefits which the colonial government once brought from the exploitation of the masses. Gikonyo’s disillusionment can be demonstrated in his futile effort to ask for bank loan from an M.P. in Nairobi. Like the other politicians, the M.P. does not really care about national development. These politicians function in postcolonial Kenya as the puppets of colonial power, preoccupied with their self-interest and neglecting their own people. As seen in the novel, it turns out that the piece of land that Gikonyo wants to buy for his business is bought by the very M.P who Gikonyo has approached for help.

Ngugi’s political vision that transpires from the fabric of *A Grain of Wheat* is one that casts a serious shadow of suspicion on the positive value of independence. He masterfully anticipates many of the postcolonial problems, as he observes the unpatriotic activities of the Kenyan elites who inherited power from colonizers. The novel chronicles with a reasonable amount of realism the anticolonial struggle. Distilled through the conscious of characters, the history freedom fighting acquires ample credibility. The author puts forth that fact the road to freedom has been strewn with unspeakable suffering. Even after being released from the detention, Mugo is still haunted by the ghost of the past suffering. Like other characters in the novel, he frequently relives the period of his detention:

*I saw men crawl on the ground, you know, like cripples, because their hands and feet were chained with iron’. All the time he spoke in a subdued voice, like a child. ‘Once bottlenecks were hammered into people’s backsides and the men whispered like caged animals,* (Thiong'o,1967:57)

To avert such an ordeal some Mau Mau adherents confess their oath to the whiteman during incarceration. Gikonyo who presides over the local branch of the Movement after the Emergency, tells Mugo that he 'was never beaten' and that he 'would have sold Kenya to the Whiteman' in return for his freedom (Thiong'o,1967:65). Gikonyo's attitude testifies that Ngugi, far from idealizing his heroes he presents with them convincing realism. Even with this seeming unpatriotic selfishness Gikonyo is not stripped of sympathy, because the author seems to imply that it is not out of cowardice that Gikonyo confesses the Mau Mau oath. His act is driven by intense love for a wife and a mother deprived of a breadwinner. Gikonyo's deed is readily contrastable with Mugo who is beaten 'many times' but never confesses the oath. In retrospect Gikonyo addresses him 'We admire your courage and hid our head in shame'. Correcting Gikonyo, Mugo tells him that what prevented him from confession is not courage but that he 'had no home to come to' and that he 'would have done the same'(Thiong'o1967:66). Although Ngugi's representation of Mau Mau questions the veracity of colonial discourses of the movement, it does not idealize it. As appears from the above discussion, the adherents are depicted as having real human weaknesses.

### Conclusion

Like many African novels written at the threshold of independence, *A Grain of Wheat* espouses a mixed feeling of joy and fear. The author warily rejoices the departure of colonization because he has his doubts about the integrity of the African leaders who were entrusted with the so-called Free states. Very soon, his misgivings were confirmed, as the African leader to whom the power was bequeathed, have proven to be worse than their erstwhile imperial predecessors.

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